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NUDISM: WHERE DID IT START?

From Noah to the Nazis: 2,000 years of nudists

Although most Americans trace the beginnings of nudism to the 1930's when it was given great surges of publicity in the press, the movement actually has a long and colorful history. In fact, the United States was the last Western country to allow nudists to pursue their ideas in freedom, the founding concept being more than eighteen hundred years old.

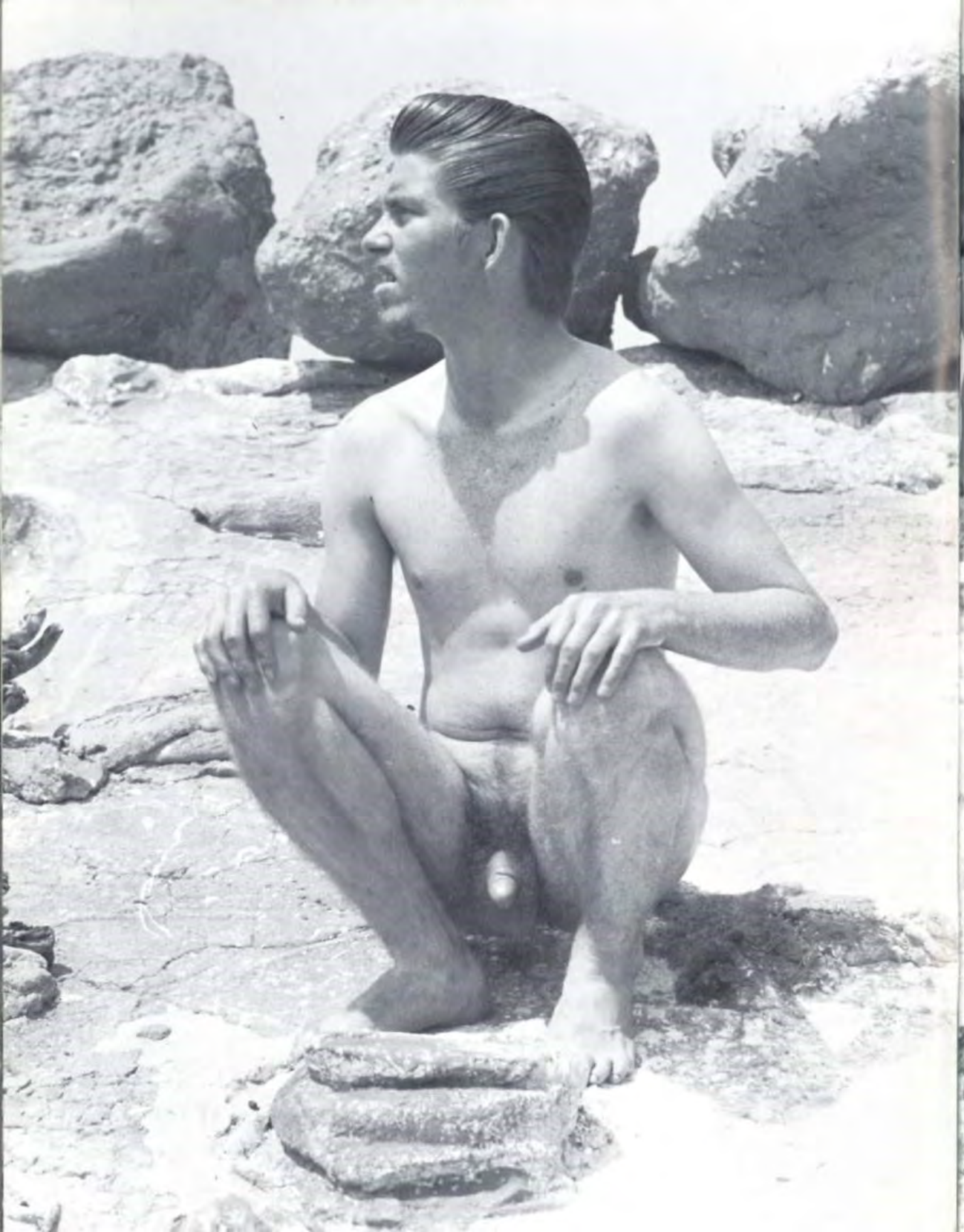
Nudity **per se** of course predates nudism, which refers to the social concept of the group which practices nudity. One of

the earliest literary references to nudity is in the Book of Genesis, which states that Adam and Eve were naked and unashamed until they ate the forbidden apple.

The most startling incident of nudity in the Bible occurs when Noah places a curse upon his son Ham's descendents simply because Ham had come upon him naked. A great deal about ancient attitudes toward nudity and homosexuality is revealed by this little drama. Ham's crime was that he entered a tent and saw his

father lying dead drunk and naked; the act of seeing a man naked was considered at that time a form of incest. Oddly enough, had Noah been discovered by one of his daughters, no crime would have been committed. Another insight into the homosexual fears of the Hebrews is seen in the rule that a mother might kiss her sons, but not her daughters, and conversely for a father.

Nudity was common among the ancient Greeks and Romans, but it wasn't until the Second Century after Christ that the cult of nudism came into being. The sect was small at first and was persecuted by the populace which still clung to the old concepts that the naked body was impure. The early nudist groups were forced to meet in hidden and remote surroundings, where they would build immense walls and use secret passwords to keep strangers and non-nudists from entering. By the Fifth Century these groups had all but vanished.



A century later, nudism began once more to blossom, although its advocates remained outcasts from society. It was not until the Middle Ages that a religious sect called the Adamites actually brought nudity to the church. However, they were severely persecuted for holding church services in the nude and the cult soon died out.

Incredible as it may seem, the nudist movement as we know it today, was actually fostered by the Victorians in rebellion against the ruthless and strangling sexual repressions of their time. The

rebellion is understandable in view of the unbelievable prudery of the era. For instance it was considered improper to refer to the parts of a chicken as "legs" and "breasts," hence, the euphemisms, "light" and "dark" meat. Victorian modesty was such that even the bare legs of a piano were often covered!

Richard Ungewitter, a German writer in the early part of the Twentieth Century, was the first man to promote the practice of nudism on a grand scale. Ungewitter dreamed of a Utopian society in which everyone was a nudist. His concern was with the increased health and moral benefits that he claimed only nudism could produce. A complete abstainer, Ungewitter desired a return to the more fundamental aspects of living—of which sex was a large part—and he expected the same asceticism of his followers. They were neither to smoke, drink, nor eat meat.

Ungewitter's ideas were contained in his book, **Nakedness,** written in 1905. The Victorian society reacted violently: Ungewitter was publicly censured, and the book (replete with illustrations) was quickly banned.

The cause of nudism was carried on by Dr. Heinrich Pudor, a contemporary of Ungewitter's. Pudor placed the emphasis on sports and gymnastics, setting up a number of camps for this purpose. Large parts of the day were devoted to rigorous exercise and physical culture, thereby discouraging anyone who had joined for lustful or unsavory psychological reasons.

The first camps to enjoy a reasonable degree of success were established by Paul Zimmerman in Klingberg Am See, Germany. Like his predecessors, Zimmerman stressed athletics and physical health, but his more moderate and realistic approach to the happiness of his members contributed to the success of the camps.

It was not until World War I that nudism began to achieve popular social acceptance. Credit for this upsurge is largely given to the **Wandervogel,** a group of teen-age nudists in Germany. Although their activities were limited to swimming in the nude, their numbers grew until scores of chapters began to appear throughout Germany and neigh-

boring countries. By 1926, there were over 50,000 **Wandervogeln** in Germany alone.

The trial of Adolf Kock proved to be a boon to the nudist cause. Kock, a gymnastics teacher turned nudist, was brought to trial for sexually abusing his students while instructing them in the nude. He was found innocent of the charges, and the resulting favorable publicity gained much-needed respectability for nudism.

All the work that went into the development of nudist camps in Germany was negated when Hitler decided to turn them into Nazi Youth Camps. The goal of personal physical h e a l t h was warped and the body was used as an instrument of the state. Nudism became a dirty word.

Following World War II, the nudist cults in Europe rebounded back into o p e r a t i o n, gaining greater numbers than ever before. Nudism spread rapidly to the French Riviera and to Scandinavia where it was combined with sauna baths and dips in ice-cold rivers.

It is not surprising that in America, where it is a national pasttime to cover the human body, nudism did not gain grudging acceptability until the late 20's and early 30's. Even then, success was due mainly to the efforts of a German nudist, Kurt Barthel. Unlike his earlier counterparts, Barthel was not an abstainer. In fact, he publicly announced that all vegetarians were lunatics. Neither was Barthel interested in gymnastics, and for this reason America did not become associated with sports and calisthenics to the degree it has in Germany.

In 1929, along with a number of his immigrant friends, Barthel formed the American League for Physical Culture—the first formal nudist organization in America. In Spring Valley, New York, the group m e t peacefully for six months until they were all arrested in a neighborhood gymnasium.

The trial resulted in a singular success for nudism as Barthel's group was found innocent of any lewdness. They were allowed to

continue their activities freely. The enormous publicity given the trial provoked earnest discussions of the merits of living in the nude, and brought the concept of nudism into thousands of American homes previously untouched by the idea.

The turning point in the history of American nudism came in 1935 with the consolidation of the existing nudist organizations into the American Sunbathing Association. Under the auspices of a formal union, nudism in America began to grow in stature and soon spread from its East Coast beginnings all the way to California.

Thriving in the warm sun, Elysian Fields, the first park to open on the West Coast, also became the most popular. This park is still in existence and is today known as McConville, after its last owner, Pete McConville.

With the coming of World War II, nudism in America came to a temporary halt, but following the war, it regained its prominence just as it had done in Europe. Today, despite continued harrassment from prudish elements in the society, nudism is flourishing as never before.

I didn't want to give up my friends, but I couldn't make myself become a nudist. What could I do?

ALL MY FRIENDS WERE NUDISTS

By Bruce Collins

I am not a nudist and at my age, 55, I don't imagine I will ever become a nudist. The idea of going nude does not appeal to me and I frankly cannot understand why people enjoy going nude. Possibly this is because I am too puritanical, as well as being somewhat bullheaded, or maybe it is that I would be too embarrassed to be seen nude by others. But having gotten by for some 35 years of my adult life without taking the plunge into social nudism, I don't see why I should change.

I do, however, know some nudists. While I do not understand their attraction to the nudist movement, I will defend, so to speak, their right to practice what they believe in. Does it sound strange to have a non-nudist defend nudists? I would not say that I am exactly defending nudists, but I do have respect for any person who will go against the mainstream of society and

practice what he believes in, so long as he doesn't hurt anyone else.

My nudist friends are nearly my age and, as I respect their views, so do they respect mine. Long ago, we reached the mutual understanding that I would not attempt to talk them out of nudism and they would not attempt to talk me **into** nudism. Merely by observing these two rules, we have maintained our friendships all these years.

As a part of our agreement, when my nudist friends visit me, they would under no circumstances remove their clothes. I should add that besides being nudists at n u d i s t parks, my friends are nudists among con-

senting friends. Since I am not a consenting friend, they do not expect to go nude when they visit me at my home. When I am invited to their home, however, I do not expect them to remain clothed out of deference to me. Therefore, when I arrive at their home, they greet me in the nude.

Many of my friends wonder how we can maintain our friendship under such circumstances, and they mention that they feel it to be an odd relationship. I feel it to be nothing of the sort. I am so used to the nudity of my friends that many times I do not even notice they are nude. The first time they went nude in front of me, however, was an interesting experience for me.

The incident came about in a strange manner. My friends had tried to talk me into nudism and I gave them reasons why I was not interested. They tried to alert

me to the pleasures of nudism and I told them, in my own stubborn way, that I was simply not interested, and that I would appreciate it if they would drop the subject. We then got into a discussion about the encroachment of freedom one's friends sometimes made upon one another. As we got more involved in this particular discussion, they brought up the fact that I was encroaching upon their freedom as nudists because there I was in their own home and demanding that they remain clothed because I was not a nudist. They said they could understand it if they visited my home, they were to remain clothed, but that when I visited their home that I should, so to speak, "live as the Romans did."

I told them I would think about what they said and also that I felt we were such good friends that we could reach an amicable understanding regarding the matter in question.

The more I thought about our discussion, the more I could see that my friends had a valid point.

Naturally, when they visited my home, they could not expect to go nude. But when I was in their home, even if I did not care to be a nudist, I could not justifiably curb their freedom by demanding they remain clothed if they did not wish to so remain. I also had the insight that if our relationship were not worked out such that my friends would have freedom at least in their own home to go nude in my presence, that our friendship would suffer.

Thus, the next time I saw my good friends, I told them that yes, I thought they were correct in their viewpoint that they should be able to go nude in their own homes when I visited them. They were very pleased that I had taken that viewpoint and told me quite frankly that in spite of how much they liked me and enjoyed my company that had I taken the opposite viewpoint, they felt it would have critically jeopardized our friendship.

After just a few minutes, they excused themselves, informing me they were going to their bed-

room to remove their clothes. While they were gone, I could not help but wonder how I would react to seeing my friends nude. I didn't have long to wait.

The first reaction I noticed was that I was making a special point of not looking at those parts of the body which were usually covered but which my friends had bared when they took off their clothes. It took me a while, however, to even notice that I was almost intentionally avoiding looking at the genital areas of my friends. I was, I noted, somewhat stiff as a result of their going nude, but I thought this might be expected since I was still in my suit and since I was not used to being around nudists.

I thought it somewhat strange that with parts of the body one is used to seeing, one will look for some time very intently at, say one's arm or face or eyes, and then look away as one's interest floats somewhere else with

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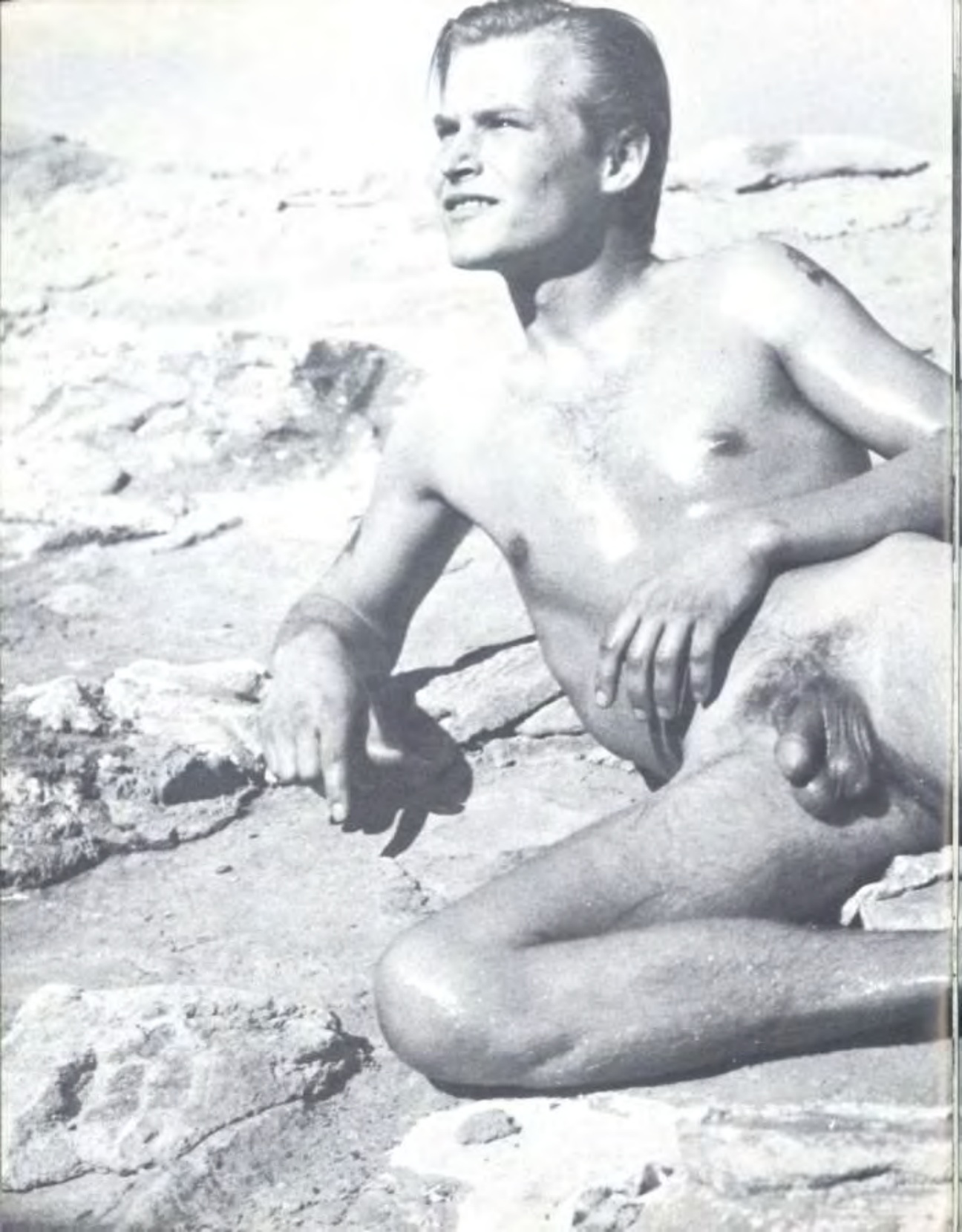

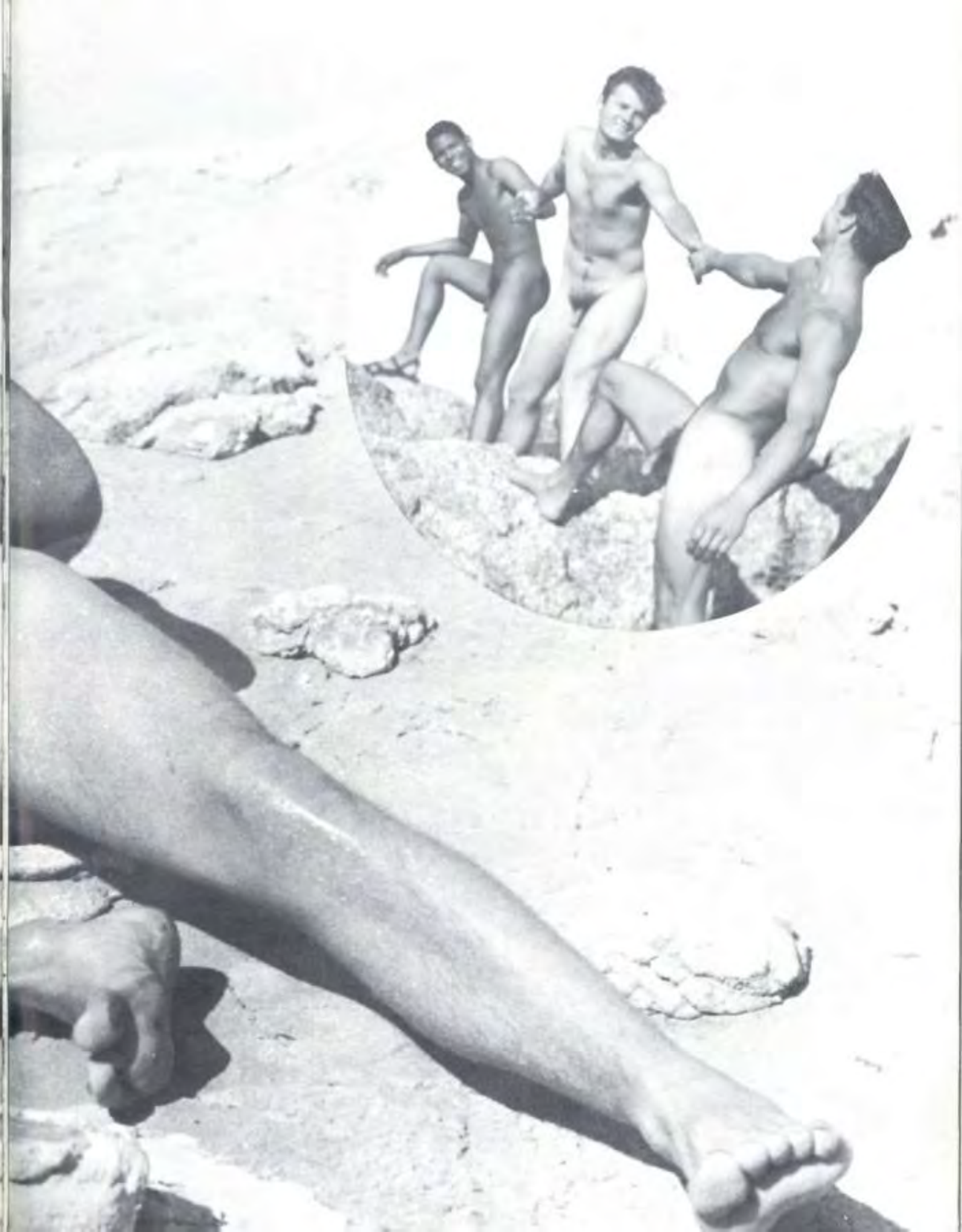

little awareness as to what part of the body was being observed. Here I was with my good friends and embarrassed at looking at a portion of their body. But as the evening wore on, I became more used to being with my friends when they were nude.

This was due to a very great extent to the fact that both my friends were very casual about their nudity and not in the least embarrassed themselves. Before the evening ended, I would say I was totally indoctrinated to the idea of my friends going nude

even though I was dressed.

some years back but more than

That particular incident was any one single event, it solidified my relationship with my friends. Because I granted them the freedom to become nude in my presence our friendship was immeasurably strengthened.

My friends now have no qualms about asking me over to their homes when their nudist friends visit them. Many have been the times that I have joined several couples who were swimming in the pool—they in the nude and I in my swimming trunks. Because I am just as casual about their nudity as they themselves are, many times I am asked over to their nudist gatherings. Of course, I take much ribbing over the fact that I am the only one with my clothes on, but I am very good natured about the kidding they give me. As time wears on, I am

certain that they no more notice I have my clothes on than I notice they have their clothes off.

From this group of nudists, I have selected several additional friends who visit me from time to time. Always in my own home, these nudists wear clothes out of deference to me. And always, when I see them on their "home" ground, they go nude in my presence.

I especially like this social set-up because it allows me to have the pleasure of the company of my friends and yet I can still act with the integrity I feel is necessary in my case: that of being dressed in the company of others.

For others, like me, who perhaps have some qualms about going nude but who are broad-minded enough to offer and to grant to others freedom of behavior, I highly recommend this approach to friends "and acquaintances" desires to go nude. For what someone else does, does not necessarily reflect on the moral codes of another individual. The fact that my friends go nude does not make me a nudist. The fact that I allow my nudist friends to go nude in front of me does not necessarily mean that I condone nudism. If they wish to go nude in my presence when I visit them, I am merely strengthening our friendship, and I am actually strengthening my own moral code, for the greatest part of my moral code dictates that I allow others total freedom in developing their codes and that others, likewise, grant me total freedom in the development of my own code. In this complex world, I do not see how one can do otherwise.

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